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Review of Through the Archival Looking Glass: A Reader on Diversity and Inclusion

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Review of *Through the Archival Looking Glass: A Reader on Diversity and Inclusion*

By Mary A. Caldera and Kathryn M. Neal, eds. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2014. 296pp. Softcover. \$69.95. ISBN 978-1-931666-70-1

What do you see when you gaze into the archival mirror? Are you privileged to see a faint image of yourself as you might have been? Or do you find only shadows, empty spaces, and tricks of the light that suggest an obscured history? As cultural heritage professionals, we are aware that the archive is often not a clear window into the past, but a hazy reflection of the creators of the dominant historical narrative. For ethnic, racial, religious, sexual, and disabled minorities, the archive too often provides no context from which to draw an enduring communal identity. Thankfully, archivists today have begun to acknowledge our responsibility to address erasures of diverse experiences from the historical record, and our role in preventing such gaps in the future. *Through the Archival Looking Glass: A Reader on Diversity and Inclusion*, edited by Mary A. Caldera and Kathryn M. Neal, brings together a series of essays that challenge the reader to think critically about archival practice and education, evaluate the current demographics of the profession, and actively battle the silences left by history.

As self-described members of traditionally under documented communities, Caldera and Neal discuss the personal importance of promoting diversity in the archive as part of the reader's introduction. Caldera, the head of arrangement and description in manuscripts and archives at Yale University Library and the former chair of the Society of American Archivists Lesbian and Gay Roundtable, the Yale University Library Diversity Council, and the Yale University LGBTQ Affinity Group, was led to research and writing about inclusion and diversity as a library school student. As a Latina lesbian, the defining moment of her archival education was discovering the existence of grassroots, community archives that "forged change from the outside as well as within the system," preserving the stories of women, people of color, and gays and lesbians.¹ Neal, currently the associate university archivist at the University of California, Berkeley, began writing about diversity as part of a natural progression. An African-American, Neal's heritage has informed many of her academic interests, from her undergraduate education to her professional archival career. As editors, Caldera and Neal continue their commitment to diversity by bringing a range of perspectives and a variety of authors together in a discussion of one of the profession's most important issues.

1. Caldera and Neal, x.

Though the Archival Looking Glass is comprised of ten theoretical essays and case studies organized in three subject based sections: larger theoretical issues surrounding diversity and inclusion, diversification of the archival record, and diversification of the archival workforce. Tackling more abstract, intellectual challenges in the first two chapters, Valerie Love and Marisol Ramos describe their experiences as “native archivists,” a role akin to the “native anthropologist,” in their work “Identity and Inclusion in the Archives: Challenges of Documenting One’s Own Community,” while Mark A. Green reflects on how his long experience as an archivist and theoretician have shaped his perspectives on diversity in the profession in his article “Into the Deep End: One Archivist’s Struggles with Diversity, Community, Collaboration, and Their Implications for Our Profession.”

The next five pieces focus directly on some aspect of the archival record. First, Jeffery Mifflin and T-Kay Sangwand discuss the necessity and complication of incorporating indigenous knowledge and intangible cultural representation into the archive in their essays “Regarding Indigenous Knowledge in the Archive,” and “Revolutionizing the Archival Record through Rap: Cuban Hip Hop and Its Implications for Reorienting the Archival Paradigm.” The next three essays present case studies wherein archivists take active and, often, innovative steps toward not only preserving records of under documented communities, but also forming partnerships with community members. Contributed to this section are “Archives (Re)Imagined Elsewhere: Asian Community-Based Archival Organizations” by Vivian Wong, Tom Ikeda, Ellen-Rae Cachola and Florante Peter Ibanez; “Documenting the Struggle for Integrated Virginia Schools: A Case Study” by Sonia Yaco and Beatriz Betancourt Hardy; and “Respecting their Word: How the Braun Library Works with Native Communities” by Kim Walters.

Finally, the last three works highlight the need for a diverse archival workforce. Sharon Thribodeau presents a reflection on the NARA diversity initiatives, specifically those on increasing diversity and awareness in the current workforce, in “Building Diversity Inside Archival Institutions.” On the theme of education, Daniel Hartwig and Christine Weidman bring the archive to high school students and introduce them to the archival profession in “The Family and Community Archives Project: Introducing High School Students to Archives and the Archives Profession,” and Anne J. Gilliland considers diversity, higher, and archival education in “Pluralizing Archival Education: A Non-Zero-Sum Proposition.” According to the editors, *Through the Archival Looking Glass* includes no reprinted articles. Instead, this volume provides fresh perspectives on one of the most discussed concerns of the archival profession.

At the forum on Diversifying the Archive at the 2014 Society of American Archivists meeting in Washington D.C., Caldera and Neal reiterated a key point from the introduction to their book. They intended the volume “neither define diversity

nor to prescribe ways to achieve it.”² Instead, they stressed that the work was meant to be a conversation amongst professionals. One of the book’s greatest strengths is this very conversation. Caldera and Neal show their excellence as editors with the order of essays and the overall flow of discussion. The theoretical pieces by Love and Ramos and Green, for example, when paired together give readers two distinct, and important, viewpoints (one from cultural insiders, and one from an, all be it professionally expert, outsider). Caldera and Neal also, refreshingly, include the work of lesser known practitioners and community activists alongside the more familiar, widely published voices of archival literature. Indeed, this volume is made all the richer, and more genuine, by the inclusion of case studies on small community based archives like those described by Wong, Ikeda, Cachola, and Ibanez.

Many contributions to this collection range from the thought provoking to the practical. The creative stand out in this volume is T-Kay Sangwand’s “Revolutionizing the Archival record through Rap.” Sangwand tasks archivists to assess the relevancy of the textual, and even tangible, historical record to groups for whom cultural expression is often performative, oral, or in some other way, ephemeral. Her application of Richard Pierce-Moses’s concept of post-custodial collecting and access to live performance, while perhaps not completely practical for real-world repository, is certainly a fascinating expansion of an already challenging concept to traditional archival theory. Daniel Harwig and Christine Weideman’s “The Family and Community Archives Project,” representing the book’s essays focused on practice, is a useful example of a “lessons learned” case study. Case studies that primarily discuss difficulties, or even mistakes and failures, are often more interesting than reports on successful, but unrepeatable, projects. Introducing the archives to high school students may be something many outreach minded archivists would love to attempt, but Hartwig and Weideman’s piece underscores the complexities of implementing a program with a non-traditional user group from outside your home institution.

The only criticism of the volume falls on the last section regarding the diversification of the archival profession. While certainly the push for a more diverse workforce is a mandatory one, the two pieces on introducing minority students at the high school and undergraduate level to the archives as a career are slightly deaf to the current job market. Gilliland’s “Pluralizing Archival Education: A Non-Zero-Sum Proposition,” for example, proposes that archival educators target students from diverse backgrounds for archival graduate programs, possibly through undergraduate minors in records and recordkeeping. While Gilliland acknowledges that archival educators must “provide meaningful financial and academic support so that a diverse group of community members and stakeholders in archival work can be empowered to become professional archivists,” she makes no mention of what will happen to these students once they enter the job market.³ Will these new professionals be able

2. Caldera and Neal, xix.

3. Gilliland, 260.

to find employment once they leave school? Can archival educators do anything to insure that their students are able to support themselves in the profession they so encouraged them to join?

Though the Archival Looking Glass: A Reader on Diversity and Inclusion is a wonderfully collection of articles that highlight the work of practitioners and theorists attempting to answer Howard Zinn's 1970 challenge to the Society of American Archivists to "take the trouble to compile a whole new world of documentary material, about the lives, desires, needs, of ordinary people."⁴ Archivists, from graduate students to graduate educators, may find this book a challenge to their current theoretical paradigm, or the source of inspiration to become activist collectors. If nothing else, Caldera and Neal have stimulated discussion on this important topic. Current and future archivists must continue this discussion, and strive to make the archive a reflection of the whole of human experience, not simply one dominant image.

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4. Caldera and Neal, xv.